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ABSTRACT

Even though Swedish students (age 9 and 14 years) placed third in the recent IEA study, reading instruction in Swedish schools is apparently no better than in other countries taking part in the IEA study. No strong correlations between type of reading instruction and students' reading skills have been found. Schools in Nordic countries work under favorable conditions--high teacher-student ratios, well-educated teachers, and a rich supply of instructional and other materials. Also, by tradition, reading is a highly valued skill in Swedish society. Very few homes in Sweden have no books at all. The emphasis on "family literacy" has contributed to parents' increased awareness of the importance of reading in the home. Students in grade 6 spend about 9 hours a week reading, in grade 9 about 8 hours a week. Children are the most frequent library visitors in Sweden. Political decisions to facilitate the opening of private schools (uncommon until recently) and freedom of choice as regards what school parents want their children to attend has led to segregation, particularly in big cities. Favorable conditions have an impact on students' reading achievement, as perhaps do other teacher variables. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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A comment on the good IEA reading results of Swedish elementary school students

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In the latest IEA-studies Swedish students in both age-groups tested, 9 and 14 years, were on third place as regards reading ability (Lundberg, 1993c). The students in these age-groups have remained in one of the top rank positions since the first IEA-studies of reading ability were carried out some 20 years ago (Taube, 1993a). In the following I will discuss a few possible explanations for the good results, e.g.,:

- instructional factors (incl methods)
- school environment
- teacher attitudes and characteristics
- historical and cultural conditions
- home environment
- availability of reading materials and libraries

The IEA findings are congruent with recent National Assessment results. Häggström (1993) reports that the majority of grade 2 (age 8-9) students in Sweden were able to read fluently and with understanding, but every tenth student needed some kind of extra support. For grade 5 (age 11-12) the results were also encouraging, and among over 3000 students only three were found not able to read simple sentences (Holmberg, 1994).

Why is this? Is reading instruction in Swedish schools better than in other countries taking part in the IEA study whose students score lower?

It seems not. According to Lundberg (1993a), who investigated teacher variables in the IEA study, the influence of teaching practices was rather limited, once the teaching context and resource factors were under control. This would mean, that the physical conditions in schools play an important role for the students' learning. And it certainly means a lot for the students' well-being. Holmberg (1994) reports, that in the Swedish National Assessment for grade 5 a task was included where the students were asked to describe their school in words and pictures. From a sample of 18 classes 72 group-work inputs were collected, most of which described a neat classroom with the teacher's desk in a centre position, almost like an altar. But the importance of the teacher's instruction was insignificant also in this study. To further prove this point, in the National Assessment for grade 2 the same result was found: no strong correlation between reading instruction and the students' reading skills (Häggström, 1993). One would expect that at least in the early grades the teaching strategies make a difference, but ....

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So, should teacher variables be ruled out altogether as explanations? Does the teacher not matter?

Within the IEA framework, in a separate study of the five Nordic countries Lundberg (1993b) found that, compared to most other countries, schools in the Nordic countries work under favourable circumstances, with small classes, i.e., a high teacher-student ratio, well-educated and experienced teachers, rich supply of instructional and other material. Also, the teachers acted as good examples to their students by reading aloud to them, and by being frequent readers themselves, and, generally they exhibited "modern" views and ideas about teaching, e.g., offering a lot of encouragement and advocating interest-based rather than skills-oriented teaching. Especially among the younger students this is probably very important for fostering good reading habits and positive attitudes towards reading; such positive attitudes were actually found among the grade 2-students in the National Assessment (Häggström, 1993) both at school and at home.

Related to this is an argument by Lundberg (1993c) that, by tradition, reading is a highly valued skill in the Swedish society. As is well known, church records show that many Swedes were able to read in the 17th century, and in the early days of popular education or elementary schooling (150 years ago) the teaching emphasis was on reading. It has changed since then, of course, so much more than just reading has to be included in the curriculum, but even much of the new content is based on the students' ability to read.

This brings us to another likely "candidate" for explaining the IEA-results, i.e., home conditions. In Sweden, like elsewhere, not all children grow up in homes that favour learning, language proficiency, and reading. However, we find very few homes today with no books at all - this has changed in the last 30 years (cf. Malmquist, 1958). Swedish students (grades 6 and 9) taking part in the IEA study of written composition in 1985 were asked about their family's possession of books (Löfqvist, 1990). One third of the students stated that there were at least 100 books in their homes, half of these claimed to possess much more than that. In nearly all homes there was at least one daily newspaper, and in half of the homes there were more than two weekly or monthly journals. But, possession of books or newspapers is not enough - somebody has to be seen reading them or actually do read them. Löfqvist also reports some statistics. Students in grade 6 spend about 9 hours a week reading, in grade 9 about 8 hours a week. This includes comic magazines but not homework, which means that they actually read even more Here it may also be worth saying that the emphasis on "family literacy" (e.g., the videotape "15 minutes a day" issued by the Swedish Parents and School Association after an English model) in later years seems to have paid off in parents' increased awareness of the importance of language and reading activities in the home.

So, various reading materials are easily available in Swedish homes (although books are regarded as expensive), and they are obviously used by the students. But they do not read only what is in the book-shelves at home, they go to the library. At least the young ones do. Löfqvist's figures are that 2/3 of the students in grade 6 visit the library several times every month, whereas 3/4 of the grade 9-students only pay the library a visit once a year.

Library studies in Sweden tell a convincing story: children are the most frequent library visitors. A list of the 30 most borrowed books in Swedish libraries in the 1980's contains no adult literature (Johansson, 1988). The most popular children's author is, not unexpectedly, Astrid Lindgren. Recently, Taube (1993b) emphasized the availability of local and school libraries as one of the most important explanations for the good reading results in the Swedish schools. In general, there is a good variety of reading materials in the classrooms, and thus, a freedom of choice.

Now to some personal reflections. The research I have referred to so far is quite recent, and yet, somewhat lagging behind. In the last few years Sweden has been in a transition period, steadily moving down from a high position among the wealthiest countries in Europe into the shades of mediocrity. This has, of course, had repercussions on education, locally as well as nationally. (In 1989 Sweden afforded about 7 % of the GNP in education. I do not have any exact recent figures but I know it has decreased since then.) Teachers are complaining about significant cuts of resources - instructional materials are out-dated, libraries are closed, schools are physically run down, classrooms are becoming increasingly crowded, less money is spent on special education, etc. Many fear that these deteriorating conditions are going to seriously harm what has been built up during the last 30-40 years.

Another contributing factor to this is the changes in policy. Schools in Sweden have been rather more "homogeneous" than in many other countries (according to IEA studies in the 1980's, NBE, 1991). Differences between schools are now growing rapidly. Political decisions to facilitate the opening of private schools (something that until recently has been very uncommon) and freedom of choice as regards what school you want your children to attend, have already resulted in heavy segregation, especially in big cities. This is particularly serious in areas with a large immigrant population, as schools with many immigrant children generally have a low status. Another parliamentary decision to allow all 6 year olds into school (although not compulsory) has in many places meant larger classes in grade 1, which teachers regard as a serious problem - modern classrooms are usually too small, as they are built for no more than 20 students, and since there is no money to buy new books the instructional materials become insufficient, etc. I think it is going to be interesting to see if the changing conditions will have any impact on reading skills in future IEA studies.

However, in regard to the so far good reading results I believe that the favourable conditions sketched above do have an impact. In a sense, Swedish schools, students, and teachers have been "spoilt". I am not saying it is wrong, quite the contrary. You do not have to be an expert in Maslow's needs hierarchy to realise that, if the physical conditions are taken care of, it is easier for people to concentrate on intellectual activities. Our teachers have been able to spend much time and effort on in-service training and on creating a favourable learning environment in the classrooms. Although there seems to be little influence of instructional practices (or teaching methods) on the students' reading ability, other teacher variables should not be forgotten, such as personal characteristics, interest and involvement in the students, interest in literacy issues and new pedagogical ideas. I also

think that these personal characteristics are difficult to separate from teacher practice as a whole.

Time is not mentioned much as an important factor for reading skills. However, as I mentioned before, Swedish students in general seem to do a lot of reading, at school as well as outside. Even here, teachers have sometimes complained - about the diminishing time that can be used for actual teaching of reading skills. A few years ago, a field experiment was carried out in Denmark, where some schools were demanded to allocate one hour extra per week for teaching of Danish. The effects on the students' reading abilities were almost non-existent (Jansen & Ziegler, 1990). Very few teachers used this extra time for reading instruction; there were so many other things to add into the curriculum. So, whether or not time in this sense is crucial remains to be proved. There is no doubt, however, that time is important in another sense, i.e., how much reading the students are involved in altogether. Something that is obvious when you encounter students with reading difficulties - they usually have much less reading experiences than their more skilled mates. Time for reading also has to do with availability of reading material, home environment and, to some extent, cultural expectations. Most of these factors are interwoven and difficult to separate. Maybe they all boil down to one thing - attitudes to reading among teachers and parents, and society as a whole, attitudes that are inherited by the younger generations.

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